

from “Notes for a Novel: Selected Poems of Frieda Fligelman”

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Introduction

(Excerpted from “The Queen of Social Logic: The Life and Writing of Frieda Fligelman,” by Alexandra Swaney; originally published in *Writing Montana: Literature under the Big Sky* [Montana Center for the Book, 1996])

Frieda Fligelman was born January 2, 1890, in Helena, Montana, to Herman Fligelman and his first wife, Minna Weinzwieg (who died shortly after giving birth to their second daughter, Belle). Herman Fligelman, a Jew, had fled the pogroms of his native Rumania in 1881 when he was twenty-two years old, arriving in Boston with twenty dollars in his pocket. He eventually headed west and settled in Helena, where he started the New York Store, a department store that prospered with the mining on Helena’s Last Chance Gulch.

Frieda and Belle often reminisced about how much their father loved learning. They grew up consulting *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* at the dinner table and reading Shakespeare in the evenings. Herman allowed his daughters to leave the state to get a first-rate education. Frieda attended the University of Minnesota from 1907 to 1909, and then moved to the University of Wisconsin. After graduation, she moved to New York for graduate study in sociology, economics, and anthropology at Columbia University. She also studied for a year

at the University of California, Berkeley.

Her first anthropology professor was Alfred Kroeber; she also took classes with Franz Boas and A. A. Goldenweiser; the historian Charles Beard; sociologists Lester F. Ward and Franklin H. Giddings; and philosopher M. R. Cohen. Anthropologist Paul Radin was an admired friend and colleague. Her first sweetheart may have been Hu Shih, a fellow Ph.D. candidate at Columbia, who would become China’s most famous modern scholar during the pre-revolutionary literary renaissance. Frieda later told a friend she had been very much in love with him, but because of his childhood betrothal to a Chinese girl at home, they did not become further involved. In any case, they remained friends, and he visited her in late 1937 when he returned to the United States to lecture on the devastation of the Japanese invasion of China. He later became Taiwan’s ambassador to the United States. This was the first of numerous passionate interests Frieda developed in scholarly, but ultimately unavailable men.

After passing her oral and written Ph.D. comprehensive exams at Columbia and spending a few years working as a sociologist, Frieda went abroad. Freed from working by a stipend from a trust fund set up by her father, she sailed to Europe, where she spent the years between 1920 and 1931, living mostly in Paris. In Paris, Frieda continued her formal studies. She attended the National School of Living Oriental Languages, taking classes with Professor Henri Labouret, a linguist and ethnologist.

Sparked by her studies with Labouret, especially a class in the Fulani language of West Africa, she conceived of a way to demonstrate that a non-western language was as complex as modern European languages. Labouret would later write of Frieda’s

work: “[T]hese are the first studies of their kind regarding a language of Negro Africa, or for that matter, the language of any other so-called primitive people.” Frieda’s scholastic preparation, as well as her ease with a statistical way of approaching data, had come together in a unique study that was ahead of its time. Sadly, in 1931, when Frieda presented her published papers on Fulani to Columbia to fulfill the requirement for the Ph.D. dissertation in sociology, her original advisor had left and the current chair of the sociology department refused her work, saying, “This is not sociology, it is linguistics.” In fact, it was not until 1974 that Frieda’s achievements were adequately recognized; in that year, the World Congress of Sociology dedicated a volume entitled *Language in Sociology* to this Montana scholar. The dedication called her,

a precursor who, more than four decades ago,
was received by closed minds when projecting an
inventory of investigations which today largely
coincides with areas of academically accepted and
financially supported sociolinguistic inquiry—and
who, nevertheless, never lost her vision but lived to
see it vindicated. . . .

The twenties were a heady time to be in Paris, especially for a young woman interested in ideas and culture. One can imagine all sorts of interesting encounters that Frieda might have had, but one in particular unleashed a different sort of writing in her. She turned to poetry for expression when she found herself hopelessly in love with a married colleague. The relationship, consummated or

not, did not last long in its romantic phase, to Frieda’s great sorrow. It is impossible—and unnecessary—to know the identity of her beloved; from inferences in the poems, he was someone with whom she worked closely, perhaps even Labouret.

In the year that this happened, sometime in the mid-twenties, Frieda composed half of her nearly 1,200 poems, initially writing them out by hand on small notepads. Later, when she returned to the United States, she compiled a 270-page typewritten manuscript of 930 of these poems, which she variously referred to as *Notes of a Lonesome Woman*, *Notes for a Novel*, or *Warning to Youth*, dedicated to “all sorts of men, in thankfulness to some, in distaste of others.” In her preface to the poems, she says she has labeled these poems notes, even though they look like poetry, because

the linear form is a dress that can be worn by
any idea. What is important about these pages is
precisely that they are notes. Random notes are an
aspect of life. They are just as legitimate a form as
Alexandrines or sonnets. . . . these are the notes of
a lonesome woman.

One can well imagine that loneliness could have overtaken sanity, especially for a woman who had so deliberately removed herself from the familiar surroundings and support of friends and family in the pursuit of knowledge. Frieda spent a great deal of time alone in her lodging, “keeping constant watch upon the scattered shop of fugitive ideas.” But at last she managed to take the white heat of grief and longing and transform it into a desire to

be useful, to help humanity, and into her singular poetry, sometimes full of despair and futility, and just as often filled with wisdom and spirit and her irrepressible wit.

In 1948, Frieda returned to Helena to care for her ailing stepmother. Feeling the pull of age and family, she decided to stay. She moved all of her papers, books, and other possessions into the then-new Hustad Apartments. From that time on she was a beloved and essential citizen of Helena, Montana. A founding member of the Montana Institute of the Arts, she also belonged to the Montana Academy of Sciences, the League of Women Voters, and the American Association of University Women. She attended public meetings and cultural events tirelessly and supported libraries and other cultural institutions financially.

Frieda succeeded at life's most challenging task: becoming completely herself. Here follows a selection of her poems:

Nature & Culture

I have an impulse to write:
Sir! You are crazy!
Go to Hell!
Bang!

But four thousand years of culture
Stand beside me smiling
And I write suavely:
Sir, would it not be possible
To reconsider the matter
From another point of view.



Hall Bedroom Scholar

Longing for plentiful shelf-space,
The mind roams in wishful expectation
Among well-ordered drawers and
card-catalogues,
Like a pioneer who gazing on
broad prairies
Sees the clean-laid furrows of
plotted fields
As ripening grain.



Narrow Streets I

Our only view
In looking out on nature
Is seeing neighbors
Going through the necessary
Stupid things of life—
Eating and dressing
Shaving and playing cards.

Oh gosh! I'd give my bath-tub
For ten miles of straight-lined prairie!



Perversity

I venerate so much the mystery of the mind
 For all the comfort it has given me,
 For all the pillows it has laid on rocks,

Sometimes it seems to me:

I carry my mind about upon a tray,
 Like John the Baptist
 Being brought by Salomé.



How strange and fair that suddenly my friendship
 Turned to Love,
 Love so elemental
 That I would die in joy
 For one long day with you.

**Dantesque**

I am too catholic
 And thus I suffer from lacunae,
 Condemned for warmth to gather
 Only the passing sparks
 From far-off fires.



I could easily give you a kick
 Into perdition, had I the skill.

Not that I care the least
 Where you might land

But only to clear my way
 Of useless nettles.

**Unrequited**

I am the paradox that must be solved
 If there is any decency in nature

I am the moving finger of an evil fate
 That will write boldly to protest its chance.

I am the warning
 That each must be God!

**Offer**

I could consider you
 A bird of passage,
 A sight to lift the eyes a moment
 And remark, "Bound South,
 The winter comes,

Snow will be early
If there is no change of wind.”

Oh bird of passage, I had
built for you a nest
To shelter through the roughest days,
If you had early learned
to brave my tenderness.



Let us take comfort that another age
More learned in reason than in custom
Will scorn to waste such love,
Recoil before brutalities
Whose only purpose
Is a cloak for vanity.
How foolishly I cry,
Oh may the time
Make haste to show itself
While youth is still with me.



Solitude

(Silence is Thought)

Dear Friend, do not misunderstand the silence.

Silence is thought
Too intimate and sudden
To trust to letters.

Silence is thought
Requiring welcome gestures:
Reading, I reach to press your hand,
Walking, I glance with questioning smile,
Lying at rest, I seek repose against your breast—

And what are words
When one has need of kisses.



Why do you search me out
After so many years
Only to ply me with your mockery,
Unconsciously left over from the love
You could not understand,
As if my absence were of no account,
And my seclusion were a prize.

My being is soft as a smile
(Tho smiles are long since forgotten).
You can not touch me with bitterness;
I am untouchable.



Round About

So you send strangers
 To gather news of me—
 And send me news by strangers!
 Like a perverted husband
 Who sends his wife upon the streets
 To whet his appetite.



I have not wept
 But now it seems to me
 My rest is after long, long
 Weeping in the dusk,

And I so weary, I have
 Forgotten why I wept,
 And wonder that you're gone.

**Refusal**

I can not meet you cordially as a friend.
 You are a snarling beast
 In wait for peaceful prey,
 And I too much in love with life
 To waste it in a futile match of wits.

**Solution**

Now at the end,
 I find me how to live.

Now at the end,
 When there is no more time to live.



You offer me the wreck of your life;
 You offer me your responsibilities;
 Elegantly, graciously, bestowingly,
 As if a crown!
 But I tell you it is a crown of iron;
 It gives me a headache.

**Realism**

If we decide to live together
 As two friends,
 It is no longer love
 But fear of solitude,
 And, above all,
 The housing crisis.



Theology

And I, if I were God,
 Would I, too, forget compassion
 And confuse philosophers
 Till they found reason in my whims,
 My hit or miss of hurricanes.
 Or would I still remember
 There is pity in the human heart.



If you should come again
 And find me waiting,
 Would you be glad
 I cared so much?

Or would you be moved to scoff:
 Women are fools for being
 So specialized.



I, too, have become ruthless:
 Not wantonly, as they who seek
 A small illusion of importance.

But to preserve the dearest gifts
 Fortune has given me:
 Freedom from malice; longing for love.

**If I Were the Queen of Sheba**

I can imagine
 Being the Lady Sultan
 Of Arabia
 With something like a harem
 Full of lovers—

But they would not be slaves
 No more than doctors
 Are slaves to suffering patients
 Or professors to eager students
 Or actors and performers
 to our need of re-creation.

And I would send
 for Ahmed or Abdullah
 And then for Ali, Shem and Japeth,
 Yakut, Iram, Bouberkr, Es-Saheli,

And then exhausting memory for names
 Call for the one who's gentle as a hound,
 And then the one who's timid as a doe
 That hardly dares to come
 And lick the hand for salt;

Then I would call for him
 Who loves to strut,
 Thrusting his head about
 Above his beautiful shoulders
 Like the huge-antlered deer,
 Who seems to wave a proud and graceful flag
 As he runs lithely forth
 To seek his food;

And then perhaps,
 The beautiful youth
 With resolute noble eyes—
 I would not touch him
 Save to stroke his hands,
 Enquire of the progress of his plans
 For an attack to conquer
 Some rude problem
 Of the universal pain.

And all would come
 With firmly glistening limbs,
 Clean from cool baths
 Or working in the breeze.

They would be glad to come,
 As glad to go;
 Returning to their fascinating art or craft
 Where some fair damsel
 Is their bright companion.

For they would not be slaves
 Locked for my pleasure,
 Waiting in anxiety
 The imperious call of master.

They would come gladly
 As a beautiful pause
 In their beautiful work—

Our caresses
 Would be the joining limbs
 of comrades creating beauty;
 Our curving arms
 Against the pillows
 And each other
 Would make designs
 To rival autumn trees.

And as the leaves dropped
 From our longing
 And a short winter covered us
 With gentle snow,
 Slowly we'd melt away
 Into delicious drowse of passing winter

And after half-an-hour
 Spring would come again.

The birds, and singing youth
At charming tasks
Outside the windows
Would wake and call us
Not to waste in an unconsciousness
The little space of life
Which must be used to hold
So many joys.



She had made of her loneliness
So great an art
That now its hurt had become a melody
And she was lost in wonder
And a strange delight
At the abundant charm of her desires.